Micro-history, Enviro-history and Kleptocrats in South Africa

C. Engelbrecht

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ABSTRACT

Both micro- and enviro-history stands to benefit historical investigations into e.g. corruption in South Africa. Micro-history in particular, when it comes to environmental issues, can question themes of global scope. It is well placed to investigate the close relationship between micro- and global micro-history specifically there kleptocratic *praxis* continue to be perpetuated at the expense of every-day. In this instance, Jacob Zuma and the ANC have been exposed.

Key words: micro-history; enviro-history; kleptocrats; corruption; ANC; illegal economy.

1. Introduction

Unlike the popularity of micro-historical research in Europe and the US, in South Africa it remains largely underdeveloped – professors Lizette Rabe (2010) and Johann M. Wasserman (2016) correctly suggested that more research should be forthcoming.

Micro-history is for Rabe (2010: 86) 'the study of the past on a very small scale'; enviro-history is for professor Jane Carruthers (Carruthers in Dovers *et al*. 2002: 4) 'a deliberation on how people use, manage or interrelate with natural resources and the natural environment, in specific circumstances at given times and places'. And kleptocrats for the purposes herein, refer to 'invisible' rulers – in public and private sectors – as privileged, powerful people who turned rogue and steal the scarce resources of a country. They are the 'invisible' movers and shakers in the darkness and secrecy of the underworld, yet operate right in front of their constituencies.

In the case of Jacob Zuma (Engelbrecht 2016), *kleptocrats* are also the president's keepers, the 'faceless, nameless bunch [of people] behind them that play a vital role to keep him in power' (Pauw 2017: 22) and out of 'his day in court' and potentially years out of jail. It is widely accepted that Zuma and cohorts have, in the process, become 'very, very wealthy' (Basson and Du Toit 2017: 3; Basson 2012: 4).

Andrew Feinstein (2007 xi) made the following point: 'within the culture of the African National Congress (ANC) it is implicitly accepted that one does not talk publicly about what happens inside the organisation. Especially if what is happening is controversial or at odds with the party line'. ANC kleptocrats straddle all walks of life – thus all strata of society (Basson 2012: 6) – from presidential and elite, business people or public figures (*haute kleptocrats*), to the least presidential ordinary citizens (*petty kleptocrats*) of society who became corrupted and corrupting lackeys of someone else. They are vigilantes in the sense that they can take the laws of the country in their own hands to 'govern' and then do so – they 'govern' others, simply 'because they can' and as a result they go out and do it, or let others do it for them. Louis Althusser (2008: 1), although in a different context, formulated this as follows: 'The ultimate condition of production is therefore the reproduction of the conditions of production'. At a time when more and more secret histories of the ANC are revealed on a regular basis, the 'conditions of production' in relation to self-enrichment at the expense of the material conditions of all South Africans, are fertile areas for micro-historical investigation.

Because of 'its imprecise limits, microhistory has the potential of considering virtually anything as a potentially productive subject of research' (García and Carlos in Grajetzki and Wendrich 2018: 12). Micro-history traditionally refers to small or insignificant events that have taken place in the private domain, events or happenings in official spaces that were not primarily open or accessible for public scrutiny. But these once hidden spheres are now attractive fields of interest for micro-historians because they present a wealth of potential opportunities for research energy. This is because kleptocrats are ideally positioned in government or corporate world to wring the laws for their own material grab wants.

The purpose of this article is to explore a few avenues to make micro-history work 'more closely' with enviro-history to describe aspects of corruption perpetrated by *haute* and *petty kleptocrats* as such illegal practices relate to environmental issues. In both instances, micro- and enviro-history are *approaches* with their own unique *methodologies* to – in this case, to reveal how kleptocrats perpetuate corruption – also in relation to environmental matters.

Corruption in South Africa, whether recently exposed by the *State of Capture* report (Madonsela 2016), through past and present high profile court cases, or the exposure of state-sponsored illegal economies of State Owned Enterprises (SOEs), are just a few such phenomenon that open up possible research interests for micro-and enviro-historians. Consider the following micro-historical question with environ-historical research implications: Were environmental rehabilitation funds, that were by law required for the Tegeta company (established in 2006 to identify and develop mining assets of the Gupta-linked Oakbay Investments Group) to rehabilitate the effected environment in the Karoo, misappropriated? In answering this question, it is believed that there is 'no evidence to suggest that Tegeta settled the fine which it received from the environmental authorities' (Madonsela 2016: 131–132, 181) in relation to gas exploration (Gilfillan 2012).

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2. New scope on cosy relationships?

Because of its small *scope* and systematic *method*, micro-history traditionally tends to shed light on the lives, beliefs and cultural practices of common every-day people of society.

According to Ginzberg (1993: 10), the American author George R. Stewart, was the first to have used the term micro-history only as recently as 1959. In essence, his book *Pickett's Charge. A Microhistory of the Final Attack at Gettysburg, July 3, 1863*, deals with a minute-by-minute account of fifteen hours in the Civil War's most famous infantry assault that took place on 3 July 1863 at Gettysburg (Stewart 1987: x).

There are a few reasons why Stewart's account is important for micro-history. It is a *detailed* description of a 15-hour battle in a war that eventually lasted more than four years. The Gettysburg assault was a *dramatic* event; some would argue that it was a *history-changing event* that altered the course of the Civil War, that of America and ultimately the world. This event questions the influence of the potential *scope of a single event* in its larger historical context. There is also some *symbolism* attached to this event that links well to the *shortcoming of language* that historians need to deal with in their everyday work. When the term 'microhistory' was first introduced by Stewart in 1959, 'we might say *that* constitute[s] the start date of a new awareness or kind of history *micro-history, as the writing about aspects of the everyday, the subaltern'* (Engelbrecht 2017b: 6. Emphasis in original.)

Micro-history only 'took off' in the 1970s primarily in Italy and America 'as a reaction to traditional top-down history typical of mainstream political and social histories' (Engelbrecht 2017b: 4) as they were practised at the time. It was Carlo Ginzburg's 1976-book (2013) *The Cheese and the Worms. The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (originally published in 1976 in Italian), that is generally credited with the rise of scholarly micro-history. Ginzburg dealt with the trials and conviction of Domenico Scandella (an ordinary miller) for propagating heretical convictions. This book is also important for micro-historical practise (Engelbrecht 2017b: 5) because it placed *ordinary* people at the centre of Ginsberg's narrative. This narrative is based on *many new sources.* It has an *analytical method* that reconstructed problems of social and cultural nature in Scandella's life. It reflects the *importance of how researchers deal* or *'read' the literature* at their disposal and the universal limits of historical interpretation, thereof (Engelbrecht 2012a; Engelbrecht 2013b). Ginzburg not only employed *oral tradition* but also asked 'what *relevance* the ideas and beliefs of a single individual of his social level can have' (Ginzburg 2013: xxvii. Emphasis added.) on the normal course of events. According to Ginzburg, it was impossible for him to make convincing *distinctions* between this and other forms of historical writing (Engelbrecht 2017: 5).

Given the nature of new evidence – now generally known as the Gupta Leaks – that was recently recovered about corruption in South Africa and its potential scope for research preferences for micro- and enviro-historians, should entice micro- and enviro-historians to delve into exciting opportunities to reveal multi-layered histories in their own right. One such example is the activities that surround the

Karoo fracking for gas exploration. In 2014, *News24* published concerns about 'connections' between government officials and those of the company and 'how [Bundu Gas & Oil Exploration] leveraged these connections to obtain a successful application' (Pillay 2014) for mining rights to fulfil statutory requirements for shale gas exploration in the Karoo basin. The suggestion is that a micro-historical investigation into Bundu Gas & Oil Exploration (a 95% owned South African subsidiary of Challenger Energy Limited, and 5% ownership by its Black Economic Empowerment partner) – an oil and gas exploration and production company listed on the Australian stock exchange, might contribute to shed light on unexpected events, places and peoples – also of 'Big People' and their 'Big Positions' in their 'Big Places', busy with 'Big *Praxis*' as they all relate to their mining activities that will have far-reaching impact on the fragile Karoo environment.

As a result, the contention is that micro-historical debates and the enviro-historical spaces in which they operate, are evolving. The proposition is that *neo*-focus exposes the national psyche of kleptocrats, as well as their global links (Engelbrecht 2014b) with other kleptocratic communities. In so doing the woes of modern race and gender problems, attacks on colonialism (Engelbrecht 2012b), capitalism, land-grab efforts, ethics and morality, to name but a few, are requiring renewed attention. In fact, both micro- and enviro-histories reprioritize the disillusionment with political philosophy and modern state institutions with environmental, educational or health services concerns. For one thing is certain: micro-historical analysis always links back to 'Big Issues' of a national and/or global scale and brings the micro-history about aspects of the current unprecedented scope of corruption by *haute* and *petty* kleptocrats, into the public domain.

Corruption in South Africa is nothing new – it dates back to the early years of Jan van Riebeeck's tenure at the Cape in the 1650s and has persisted without fail throughout South African political history (Binckes 2013: 66, 84, 97–111, 174). In fact, *haute* state-housed corruption has contributed towards the social stratification of the South African society from Van Riebeeck's days (Elphick and Giliomee 1980). After all, Van Riebeeck was recalled in 1647 from Tonkin back to Batavia *before* he came to South Africa, because of his alleged involvement in private trading for personal gain (Böeseken in De Kock and Krüger 1972, II: 799; Binckes 2013: 45, 55). Similarly, the last word about Van Riebeeck's private land owing (Böeseken in De Kock and Krüger 1972, II: 801; Böeseken in Müller 1986: 31) fortunes during his reign in the Cape colony, has not been written.

The realities of systemic, institutionalized corruption during the Zuma-years (Basson and Du Toit 2017: xii) will no doubt extend well into the future. In fact, former minister of finance, Pravin Gordhan, said that it would take 30 years to be rid the South African society from corruption. Evidence of the nature and scope of a corrupt*ing* culture particularly during the Zuma-years, are now already innovative sources for research. *Haute* culture of the political elite and their connections thriving on monopoly capital, continue to make world news headlines as the availability of official and unofficial material evidence pour in on a daily basis (Myburg 2017: x). Ongoing court cases are made public for the world to listen to, read and observe. In fact, *longue durée* micro-historical studies about corruption in South

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Africa and how it relates to environmental concerns, has yet to be attempted. In light of the decision by the national director of public prosecution Shaun Abrahams on Friday 16 March 2018, to prosecute Jacob Zuma on 16 charges of fraud, corruption and racketeering, this case will be keep micro-historians who follow this story, busy for many decades to come.

It is clear that one particular under-explored area for research is precisely that of the environment. Whilst popular national parks play a much more important role than accommodating wildlife for conservation (Engelbrecht 2017a), the role and involvement of *haute* and *petty* kleptocrats in environmental affairs are coming to the fore – whether they are customs officials, security check-in personal or in the police services. Such unfolding of events makes for renewed research perspectives surrounding enviro-justice and corruption. The links to governmental officialdom where national parks have been repurposed by *haute* culture and *praxis* of *petty* kleptocrats who loot the parks for personal material benefit, are now in the public domain. The iconography of elephant ivory and rhino horns, are the first (but not the only) that come to mind. Environmental humanities have a constructive role to play in unravelling illegal global trade in flora and fauna. The close relationship between rural life and the core of national and international exchange centres for contraband, make for interesting research areas in enviro-history. There are unexplored research areas to compare methods of acquiring poaching spoils, lifestyles that go with the illegal trade and values that reign in the underworld, that would assist to defy stereotypical interpretation of past and present practises in private spheres. Many of these changes are brought about through new technological means, where repurposed centres for looting have become public contested spaces.

Various social media platforms in e-media, investigative journalism and the role of the judiciary in South Africa, increasingly expose events and activities that are unofficial and extra-legal, let alone inaccessible. This includes the culture of behaviour of the *haute* elite turned kleptocrats, who occupy meta-government and super-managerial positions in business where they perpetuate corporate corruption. The focus is shifting away from, but not leaving behind, the traditional little-people focus of traditional micro-history, to also focus on ‘Big People’, their ‘Big Positions’ and ‘Big Spaces’. A few examples of recent revelations will suffice: the ANC *praxis* during the Zuma-years have now been exposed beyond doubt and will remain to attract future research focus in endeavours to place on record past and pending court cases about the two decade failed ‘democratic’ governance for ‘all’ South Africans (Boraine 2014). The Gupta Leaks, commissions of inquiry, their subsequent reports, and the political will of civic society and opposition politics, reshape the daily lives of the kleptocrats and everyday citizens in this country alike. A new underworld in SOEs is exposed, and marginalized communities are pushed to the fore as civic society stands up against corrupt ANC *praxis* of paid kleptocrats. Environmental rehabilitation funds that were by law required for the Tegeta company to rehabilitate the environment were attended to by the *State of Capture* report. It has been reported that there is ‘no evidence to suggest that Tegeta settled the fine which it received from the environmental authorities (Madonsela 2016: 131, 132, 181). Funds made available for mining rehabilitation were

misappropriated and not allocated for the intended purposes that would give credence to environmental justice. This example shows how traditional focus on ordinary people is transposed to hone in on situations that are rarely subjected to sufficient evidence situations, to an almost overwhelmingly vast corpus of sources situation (Myburg 2017: ix). Under these conditions, exceptional discoveries follow at almost every reading or testimony listened to during new investigations about state and corporate corruption.

Given the 'popular' disposition of contemporary environmentalism, the multidisciplinary 'closeness' between micro-history and enviro-history, the growing relevance of the 'Six Extinction' concept, and the role of cultural ancestors, all contribute to the revitalization of new interpretations, perspectives and language in and for future research. There is, it is argued here, no reason why discoveries that focused on a small, insignificant community or on a single ordinary person or event, cannot be applied to the *haute* kleptocrats in privileged layers of society. There are ample examples in recent South African history, how *haute* kleptocrats and their co-corruptibles enrich themselves at the expense of the environment or non-human life (Basson 2012: 4). Micro-historical studies can reveal aspects of the underlying cultural values and social practices of kleptocrats that are seldom accessible to the open society at the expense of the misfortunes of particular small individuals or 'Big People' around *haute* kleptocrats. Since there is sufficient scientific evidence that corruption impoverishes citizens, the following pertinent question can be asked: who is really the enemy of the open society in South Africa? (Popper 2008, Vol. 1 and 2). Basson and Du Toit (2017) answered this question decisively in *Enemy of the People*.

The above conditions suggest clues about class, gender, age, aspirations of personal nature, expectations, limitations and multi-layered interactions. Small scale micro-historical investigations into surplus capital accumulation and surplus environmental exploitation, reveal a culture of a 'money-orientated mentality' (García and Carlos in Grajetzki and Wendrich 2018: 3) in illegal money trade in repurposed state-based centres of capital concentration. Enviro-historians have some work to do here. Complicity between cohorts and actual attitudes of 'Big Individuals' and something as small as a one-on-one mobile phone conversation, private meeting, or private emails, are typical sources for areas of micro-historical investigation/s. A single decision to get involved in the Arms Deal, or to appoint a cohort to a SOE board, can have far reaching implications not only for *haute* and *petty* kleptocrates, but also for an entire nation, thus linking together the micro- to the macro- or mega-levels of environmental historical analysis to the international community. The Bell Pottinger and Steinhoff revelations in the last quarter of 2017 on misinformation and accounting fraud respectively, have instantaneously shown how micro-focus can escalate to the global information public domain (Engelbrecht 2014a). The contention is here that fraud and corruption are practised by *haute* (haves) and *petty* (have-nots) kleptocrates in a *network of 'trading communities'* in an inverse *'triangle of haves, haves and have-nots'*. These reflect the diverse class and race orientations of ruling party deployees. These specialized communities reveal an aggregate of corrupt, corruptible and potentially corrupt kleptocratic 'club

memberships' – all having some form of access to scarce resources that need to be fraudulently appropriated for limited redistribution in the kleptocratic network.

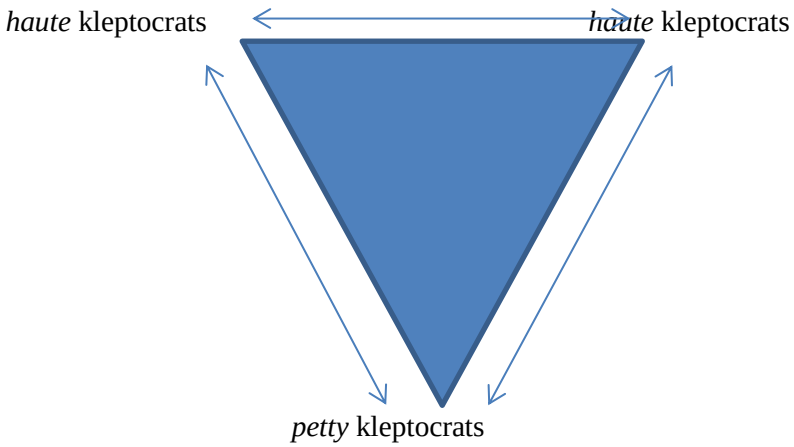

Figure 1. Kleptocratic networks.

There are at least two philosophical truisms that are of relevance to this situation. They are not analysed here but merely 'announced' for future research: firstly, the philosophy of 'time to eat', and secondly, the philosophy of 'power and poverty'. In her testimony on 23 February 2018 before the Moerane Commission of Inquiry that investigates the underlying causes of political killings in the KZN province, Hlengiwe Mkhaliphi simply repeated a 2-decades old unspoken sentiment that the ANC 'don't care about the masses of the people. They want to eat. It's a marathon between the ANC factions who must eat' (Mthethwa 2018) – a competition that sometimes ends in death.

Although in a different context, Mike Muller (Muller in Mc Lennan and Munslow 2009: 225–226) wrote in the same vain:

> '[t]he tension between the need to address historic inequalities and poverty and the imperative of building black capitalist class has become acute. In this context, water and motorcars, or more correctly, who has access to what kind of water service and who drives what make of car, have become two defining features of post-apartheid society, reflecting the post-independence experience of East Africa where emergence of the *Wabenzi* (the class who drove in Mercedes), came to characterize political development'.

This phenomenon dates back 30 years in the ANC's most recent history and is therefore nothing new. One example will underline this. Former director-general in the department of justice and national director of public prosecutions, V. Pikoli and journalist Mandy Wiener wrote about Pikoli's experience as follows:

> 'I felt that one or two of the people I was working with on the Committee were not honest. There were properties I knew about that were not being declared and […] other ANC assets that weren't being recorded. I knew for a fact that there were farms, houses, cars and other assets that hadn't been disclosed and I'm sure some individual members of the ANC benefitted at that time – not only in Zimbabwe but in Tanzania, Angola and other places' (Pikoli and Wiener 2013: 92).

The reality of ANC cadres working from within the organisation to circumvent normal good governance practices for material gain (Van Loggerenberg and Lackay 2016: 27), still haunt the party today.

Many personal stories about exile experiences do not hide discontent and disillusionment with and within *haute* ANC leadership. Perter Harris (2008: 46) for instance, described a situation, how, in 1983, of a lot of complaining by people who wanted to fight at home and not in Angola, and about lots of talk about 'guys in London and in the diplomatic missions in Europe while [lower rank and file] in the camps' were fighting Unita in Angola'.

In relation to the second truism – 'power and poverty' – Zuma said on 4 May 2008, at an ANC rally in Khayelitsha, Cape Town: "I did not join the struggle to be poor." Similar utterences have been made many times thereafter. When those influences are read in conjunction with Zuma's views about the relationship between business and his consistent claims that that he 'has not done anything wrong' in relation to corruption, the following places a different perspective on the principles of his interpretation. On 12 January 2013, at the 101st ANC Anniversary Gala Dinner in Durban, Zuma said (Van Onselen 2014: 83):

> "We're not forcing people … you can support and be a supporter, but if you go beyond that and become a member, [and] if you're a businessman, your business will multiply … Everything you touch will multiply. I've always said that a wise businessperson will support the ANC … because supporting the ANC means you're investing very well in your business."

Zuma's doublespeak (Van Onselen 2014: 70; Myburg 2017: xi) and his 'inability to distinguish such things has had consequences not only for his presidency but for his cabinet at large' (Van Onselen 2014: 71) – he finally had to resign on Wednesday evening, 14 February 2018. Two weeks later, in the evening of 27 February 2018, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced his new cabinet, leaving 10 Zuma ministers out of his cabinet. It is therefore not surprising that Basson (2012: 133; Engelbrecht 2014a) summarized Zuma's shortcoming as follows:

> 'This is a startling thought: that the president of our country does not understand corruption; that he thinks there was nothing wrong with letting Schabir Shaik fund

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> his lifestyle while he promoted Shaik's business interests on the side.'

The 'fluidity of relations' (García and Carlos in Grajetzki and Wendrich 2018: 3) between ordinary rural people and *haute* kleptocrats, are to some extent profoundly biased towards those who can promote, action, demand and bow to the commands of *haute* kleptocrats. In turn, the recent history of corruption in South Africa has shown how easily denial, finger-pointing, and whistle-blowing can take place for desperate self-preservation. Often, if not always, they turn to the laws of the country to lend protection for extra-legal behaviour. For decades before 1994, and for at least 24 years thereafter, the ANC myths surrounding condemnation of apartheid, has not been fully revealed. By the end of the 20th century, Mark Gevisser (2009: xxx) wrote in this regard:

> 'Like an increasing number of South Africans, I have wearied over time of the government's tendency to blame all problems on the legacy of apartheid (or the 'counter-revolutionary' agendas of the media), but I began to realize now, for the first time, how profoundly disempowering it must be if you – the moral victory of the struggle against apartheid – have to blame your shortcomings perpetually on the illicit regime you thought you have conquered.'

In this, the testimonies before the Life Esidimeni arbitration hearing, finger-point even remnants of apartheid. Micro-historical investigation into these spaces of robust contestation of the past, and even where current central, provincial or municipal communities have collapsed, where fraudulent and corrupt communities seem to be able to continue with its own non-institutional nature of *modus operandi*, would do well to allocate research resources into the tragic stories of the families who testified before the Life Esidimeni hearing. The current land expropriation without compensation debate, testifies to this proposition. There are many stories of land dispossession *and* stories of loss of land through politically sponsored illegal land-grab. This then becomes the 'institution'. Community gangsterism in the Cape Flats or political or related killings in the Glebeland Hostels (Singh 2198), are examples where a 'new normal' has taken shape. In all of these examples is scope for micro-analysis where a new form of 'colonialism' or 'colonizing' of the traditional way of life has taken shape (Engelbrecht 2012b). Without exception, and specifically during the Moerane Commission of investigation, *haute* kleptocrats have been implicated or identified. A last example will suffice. The Farlam Commission of Inquiry into the Marikana Massacre when police shot and killed 44 striking miners, have revealed grave transgressions through all levels of the policing fraternity in this national tragedy. From a micro-historical perspective, this incident resembles many of the micro-historical principles found in the study of the Sharpeville shootings of the 1960s and makes for strong cases for future comparative micro-historical studies in conjunction with enviro-historical analysis.

Conclusion

The re-focusing of micro- and enviro-historical analyses of also the 'Big' in the public sphere, can equally contribute to new scopes of traditional micro-historical efforts that tend to focus on the 'small'. In this way both 'histories' present a 'unique opportunity for scholarship to tackle the human dimensions of the environmental crisis' (Bergthaller *et al.* 2014: 261) in what has now become known as the 'environmental humanities'.

This added vista, follows a wide range of recent publications (e.g. Harris 2008; Holden 2008; Gevisser 2009; Mc Lennan and Munslow 2009; Basson 2012; Pikoli and Wiener 2013; Boraine 2014; Mashele and Qobo 2014; Van Onselen 2014; Van Loggerenberg 2016; Basson and Du Toit 2017; Kasrils 2017; Myburg 2017; and Pauw 2017 to mention only a few) about the *haute* and *petty* South African kleptocratic perpetuation of a corrupt societal culture. This is because kleptocratic social formations arise from a dominant corrupt mode of production. Louis Althusser (2008: 2) wrote: 'Everyone (including the bourgeois economists whose work is national accounting, or the modern "macro-economic" "theoreticians")' caught on to the realization 'that no production is possible which does not allow for the reproduction of the material conditions of production: the reproduction of the means of production.'

Enviro-history can benefit by drawing on well-defined micro-historical analysis of important questions that would be helpful to dissect the 'small' in the 'big' when it comes to issues that focus on the environment. For instance, only days before deputy-president Ramaphosa was sworn in as the new president of South Africa, the controversial Zuma-driven nuclear deal, was reversed in public. A micro-historical study of what went on behind the scenes before this announcement, and the far reaching implications for the environmental debate in South Africa, would be a useful study.

However, regardless of exposure of historical corruption in the ANC that dates back pre-1920 and later, particular during the Zuma-years, 'it would be unfair to suggest that the seeds for its [read ANC's] collapse began with Zuma' (Mashele and Qobo 2014: ix), hence 'it [the ANC] continues to fiddle in the dark' (Mashele and Qobo 2014: xi). It is therefore incorrect to maintain that 'The Arms Deal and its cover-up were the moment at which the ANC and the South Africa government lost their moral compass' (Feinstein in Holden 2008: vii; Engelbrecht 2013a).

Instead, the phenomenon that governments have 'lost their moral compass' is a research field to which all genres of history – gender history, micro-history, global micro-history, enviro-history, global history, social history, cultural history, economic history – to name some, can contribute, because '[w]here does the local fabric of human life stand in the great heights of global history?' (Patton 2018).

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